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ABSTRACT

In 1992, a nationwide poll of active forensics programs concluded with an open ended question of how to increase participation in NDT (National Debate Tournament) debate that yielded four goals. The first goal, re-emphasizing communication skills, arose because NDT has emphasized rapid delivery above all else. NDT needs to be more entertaining to the listener, and this can only be accomplished by decreasing the emphasis on extensive research and increasing the emphasis on basic communication skills. Critic intervention and ballot alteration are two methods to re-align speaking rates in NDT debate. The second goal, encouraging new participants, can be achieved by: having a novice division at all tournaments; creating a small squad division; and ending judge disqualifications. The third goal is to integrate NDT debate by urging NDT schools to offer more forensics activities and allowing students to compete in both individual and debate events. The fourth goal, de-emphasizing research, can be met by: releasing the topic in the fall, stopping reliance on backfiles, and having two topics each year. For even a remote chance of survival, changes in NDT debate must be dramatic and immediate. (Contains 44 references.) (RS)

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Four Steps To Revitalizing NDT Participation

By

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Introduction.

Commentators have long warned of declining NDT participation.[1] Henderson's (1990) review of forensic literature found that the number of NDT tournaments plummeted from 324 during the 1973-74 year to just 80 in the 1988-89 year. CEDA Debate was created because NDT Debate was "failing in its educational mission" [Hollihan, Riley & Austin 1983] and that NDT was plagued with poor delivery [Ulrich 1985]. CEDA's purpose, from its constitution, is to "ensure the long-term growth and survival of intercollegiate debate activity by promoting a form of debate striking a balance among analysis, delivery, and evidence" (1988 at 1). Morello & Soenksen (1989) described policy debate as "sick and reversing this crisis will require bold initiatives" (p.20). Trapp (1990) warned "opportunities to debate propositions of policy are severely limited, especially west of the Mississippi. Policy debate no longer is the standard" [p. v.]. If something is not done soon, NDT Debate may become another historic relic, like six-man debate.

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In 1991, Ludlum offered a nationwide poll of active forensic programs. The poll asked descriptive information about forensics programs and levels of participation in each activity. The poll concluded with an open ended question of how to increase participation in NDT debate. Those suggestions which were recommended at least three (3) times have been organized into four categories and are presented in the following pages. These ideas are not those of the author, while the author certainly supports them. These ideas are from active members in the forensics community who have an interest in seeing NDT debate thrive.

Understanding change is needed, I will describe and support four goals to increase NDT Debate participation: re-emphasize communication skills, encourage new participants, integrate NDT and de-emphasize research. Next, I will discuss several policies to further each goal, focusing on viability and possible success for increasing NDT participation. I will conclude with an urgent call for action.

I. Re-emphasize Communication skills

Individual Events have been described as a sacrifice of substance for style [Miller, 1988]. If so, NDT debate must be the sacrifice of style for substance. NDT has emphasized rapid delivery above all else. This emphasis has harmed the activity gravely. NDT needs to be more entertaining to the listener and this can only be accomplished by decreasing the emphasis on

extensive research and increasing the emphasis on basic communications skills. Ludlum [1991] wrote that the active NDT schools believed participation dropped because of the research burden. However, the poll revealed that the highest rated problem and most frequently given reason for leaving NDT was the excessive speaking rate (p.11).

"Debate [has] special emphasis on the creation, practice, and evaluation of message units..." [Douglas, 1972]. However, if the message units are filled with jargon, spoken too rapidly and delivered to (or into) a pile of notes rather than towards the audience, they will not be received. Cox & Jensen (1989) wrote "students rarely demonstrate the communication skills conducive to meaningful interaction and argumentation. Lawson [1991] wrote "the presentational techniques used by contemporary tournament debaters deviate substantially from what would be considered 'good' delivery in virtually any speaking situation (p.56). He argued the trend is for speaking rates to increase [Lawson at 57]. An emphasis on communication restores confidence, entertainment value and integrity to the activity.

As NDT participation has dwindled, NDT debaters have moved to CEDA debate without altering their speaking style. CEDA speaking rates have drastically increased [Colbert, 1988], even though the purpose of CEDA was to escape from NDT speaking rates [Ulrich 1986 and Cirlin 1986]. Jensen & Preston [1991] had students analyze the National CEDA Finals. Not surprisingly, the students did not say <u>anything</u> positive about the speaking style

(p.45). The problems of speaking rates have enveloped and harmed the activity.

Several arguments have been made to refute the importance of communication skills. First, the importance of debate has little to do with communication skills. Thompson [1944] wrote "Although debaters improve very much in delivery, skill in presentation is always a means and not an end....the distinctive value of debate lies elsewhere." Bahm [1988] added:

> The failure of academic debate to mirror ordinary discourse is not a condemning criticism. The results of an educational technique are a far better measure of its effectiveness than how that technique in operation might look to the uninitiated observer. It should be the resultant critical thinking skills which have meaning to the outside community, and not the methods of the activity itself (p.27).

That may be true, but academic debate does not exist in a laboratory setting. These "critical thinking skills" are impossible to assess or show in a real environment without communication. Until collegiate debate finds a benefactor willing to subsidize a national debate circuit, debate programs must appease those who control the funds, the College Administrators. Of course, it is far easier for college administrators to justify the expense on an activity which is entertaining and informative to themselves, being lay persons to the activity. However, most NDT Debaters speak too quickly and rely on jargon [Hollihan, Riley & Austin, 1983]. As a result, those outside the activity, including college administrators, do not understand NDT Debate. Dittus [1991] noted "As more schools face budgetary constraints,

forensics will be able to justify its continuation only if we can demonstrate that forensics provides for a well rounded liberal education" (p.27).

Lawson [1991] commented that he knew about "programs which have lost their support because coaches made the mistake of inviting senior faculty to judge final rounds" (p.57). Faculty, even ex-debater coaches are astonished to see the drastic decline in basic speaking skills. If the speaking styles do not change, college administrators may hesitate to fund an activity which appears to have little purpose.

The second argument used to refute the importance of communication skills is Debate does not have an audience to absorb positive communication skills. The argument is: "Most intercollegiate debates take place in front of an audience of one person who serves as the judge. There is no public, thus it seems presumptuous to expect that normal public speaking behaviors would result" [Colbert, 1988].

I find this similar to the cartoon which states: "Smoking a cigar means never having to say you're sorry" (Since by the time the cigar is finished, no one is remaining to complain). Poor communications skills drove away the audience. Now, ironically, some are using the lack of an audience as a justification for poor delivery skills.

This is not a "chicken or the egg" problem. Debate programs began with an audience [Howe, 1982]. American debate programs began with the style of the Oxford Union [Cox & Phillips, 1990], which emphasized, above all else, excellent communication skills [Rodden, 1985]. However, it digressed. It has evolved into no-audience debate and some in the forensic community define this is as progress. It is not. The lack of an audience and a decreasing number of participants is not progress, it is failure.

Some respond by stating "society has changed." The public no longer wants to see debates, especially on college campuses with so many other activities. This view is also incorrect. Although collegiate debates never attracted crowds like collegiate football, they still had an audience. Debate audiences did not leave because of competing attractions on campus. They left because they felt ignored and unwanted by American style debate.

As a personal example, the Speech Communication Association annually sponsors international debate teams to tour the United States. I was fortunate to have participated in these debates. When the English Debate team came to our campus, a strange thing happened. An audience of 200 suddenly appeared. People laughed at the jokes and asked questions about the issues. The audience enjoyed it. Why did this occur? It happened because we practiced audience analysis and basic communication skills. We emphasized things rarely seen and seldom blessed at tournaments: eye contact, vocal variety, a conversational speaking style. I firmly believe an audience will appear for collegiate debates if

debaters start to use effective communication skills. Cox & Jensen (1989) noted that interest in the public debates at Central Missouri State University have caused the attendance to increase 400%. Obviously, there is still great interest in public debates, even on college campuses.

The third and final argument, and one which I find insulting, is debate judges are incompetent, ie., debaters are excellent orators and judges simply do a poor job of listening. Colbert [1988] wrote "debate judges should consider honing their listening skills before concluding that all rapid speech is incomprehensible....not everyone has the mental and physiological skills to speak at or listen to rapid vocal delivery" (p.8-9). That may be true, but it is hardly a defense of the status quo.

Commentators describe debate speaking styles as "rapid fire" [Kruger 1960] and "machine-gun rate" [Ericsson, Murphy & Zeuschner 1987]. To be certain, all involved in debate would agree that it is "not representative of what is appropriate in public speaking situations" [Cox & Jensen 1989]. Colbert [1987] showed that speaking rates in NDT steadily increased from 1968 until 1982 to the rate of 302 wpm, far beyond the average speaking rate of 100 - 200 wpm. At that rate, it is difficult to keep comprehension high, even in a laboratory setting. Most debate tournaments are far from a sterile laboratory environment. Being both tired and hurried, we expect sterling performances in rooms rarely accommodating and cluttered with distractions. All these

problems only decrease comprehension, which makes the speaking rate appear faster, comparatively.

Further, the "laboratory setting" for academic debate is a myth. Most college programs are designed to mirror the actual career world. Law students are trained to behave as actual attorneys. Medical students are trained to behave as actual doctors. These educational institutions develop their educational programs to mirror the professional world they are about to enter. However, there is no "professional debate" [Cox & Jensen 1989]. Students need to be prepared for in-depth discussions in a public speaking format, not a mythical laboratory setting.

As a result, speaking rates should have declined, but in NDT they progressed ever higher. NDT Speaking rates are so outlandish that they have alienated the rest of the forensic community and those who control the funding. Cox & Jensen (1989) argue that basic communication skills have been so ignored "Debate is moving rapidly toward being an elitist activity." The attitude "people who can't handle the speed are incompetent" only further isolates and endangers NDT debate.

There are two methods to re-align speaking rates: critic intervention and ballot alteration.

A. Critic Intervention

For critics to intervene, they must first view communicative

skills as important. Several vigorous defenders of NDT do not hold this belief. Panetta (1990) wrote that debate coaches should stop "bemoaning the fact that competitive debate no longer resembles the public argument of the citizen orator, critics should search for....intellectual companions for specialized policy debate" [p.75-76]. Jensen & Preston [1991] stressed the increased use of critic intervention after a lengthy student evaluation of CEDA speaking styles. Whether this is in the form of a referee [Ulrich 1985] or in oral critiques after the round, the judges must aggressively require the debaters to have a conversational, or at least a comprehensible speaking style. Ziegelmueller (1990) notes that this has already started. He wrote "More judges are speaking out during rounds of debate to warn debaters when they talk too fast. Policy debaters are more clearly identifying issues and focusing on fewer arguments in rebuttals" [p.30]. What is needed now is more vigorous support from all in the activity. This idea is tied very closely to the second, ballot alteration.

B. Ballot Alteration

This alteration is of two types. First, some ballots do not have a place for any comments specifically for delivery. These ballots need to be changed to encourage feedback on the delivery style. Without a special section for comments, judges may forget to comment on delivery or only be inclined to make a comment when delivery is incomprehensible. The ballot forms themselves should

reflect delivery as an important issue in debate.

Second, judges should write comments, both good and bad, on delivery style on every ballot. Often, judges feel obliged to limit their comments to the arguments in the rounds. However, by not mentioning delivery, this feedback implies delivery is not important. Such a misconception must be prevalent among college debaters, as research occupies their spare time and not practicing delivery.

II. Encourage New Participants

One of the major problems facing NDT debate is declining participation. Ludlum (1991) found that only 16.15% of colleges active in forensics are active in NDT Debate. Danielson & Pettus (1990) concluded in their poll "nearly half of the programs that currently offer only individual events used to offer debate as well." Further, forty-two percent (42%) of NDT schools participate in no other forensic activity [Ludlum, 1991]. Rowland & Deatherage (1988), wrote that by the late 1980s NDT participation was rapidly decreasing and that the entire activity was "perhaps dying" (p.246). Active NDT Debate schools are becoming both extinct and isolated from the rest of forensics. Much of this may be caused by the elitist views of some active NDT participants. Panetta (1990) wrote "an implicit entry barrier exists in NDT debate in that program directors who come to the activity later in life are often treated as outsiders rather than potential converts. A necessary precondition that must be met before

one is deemed competent is a longstanding personal history in the activity" [p.74].

To keep any college activity thriving, there must be constant recruitment of new participants, since there is a natural elimination of participants (graduation). For NDT Debate, with compounding problems of extinction and isolation, recruitment is necessary for survival. I have grouped several options offered by the respondents of the earlier poll which all focus on recruitment of both new students and new schools.

A. Have A Novice Division At All Tournaments

Novice competition is vital to keep the activity healthy and educational [Ziegelmueller 1990]. However, it is more than simply having a novice division, it must be nurtured. To keep newcomers appeased, they will need some rewards. The best way to reward them is to have a Novice Division at all tournaments, allowing the newcomers to receive some recognition for their accomplishments. Presently, it is common to collapse open and novice divisions. Since there are so few teams in either division, they must be combined to have a tournament. By collapsing divisions, advanced and novice students are co-mingled in preliminary rounds, then separate novices for elimination rounds. As expected, novices have a difficult time in preliminary rounds. Under this scheme, I have attended tournaments where every novice NDT team got an award, even those without a single victory. The

problem is increased since advanced students dominate NDT Debate [Ludlum 1991]. With collapsed divisions, novice awards seem more like a door prize than an award of merit. If NDT is going to keep the novices it has attracted, it must offer some sincere recognition of their accomplishments [Ludlum at 13]. Having a separate novice division at all tournaments is a positive step.

B. Create A Small Squad Division

A handful of large squads dominate NDT Debate, since they have a research advantage [Ludlum at 13]. Over half (57.14%) of active NDT schools have four or more teams competing [Ludlum at 7]. If the forensic community could devise a way to reward smaller squads, perhaps they would participate. One way to do this is to create a small squad division. Smaller squads would have a separate division at tournaments, similar to novice divisions. In this way, a one-team squad would not have to compete with schools with four teams (who can divide the research). Defining a "small squad" would be both difficult and subjective, and it certainly has the potential for abuse. However, all procedural and ethical rules have this potential. Still, it may encourage new schools with small programs to compete in NDT.

C. Stop Judge Disqualifications

Judge disqualifications simply reinforce the strategic advantage of keeping bad habits of the activity. Logue (1987) found the forensics community keeps traditions because of habit

rather than well grounded justifications for their continuation. Experienced, successful debaters adapt to the style of their particular judge [Rowland 1981]. However, with judge disqualification, adaptation is not necessary, as debaters can exclude those judges whose style they do not prefer. Experienced NDT debaters prefer to speak as fast as they can, therefore, they disqualify judges who do not prefer this style. Inexperienced debaters mimic the actions of the more experienced debaters [Bahm 1988] and the fast speaking rate becomes permanent. Advanced students predominate NDT Debate [Ludlum 1991], which only compounds this effect.

By ending judge disqualifications, debaters would adapt to all judges, including those who prefer slower speaking rates. Encouraging debaters to master a broad spectrum of speaking styles will benefit both the students and the activity [Cox & Jensen 1989]. If NDT is going to survive, it must change, not simply look harder to find those who tolerate fast speaking rates. Cox & Jensen warn that if debate does not mirror more public speaking styles, it will become "so closed that debate fails to be interactive beyond its own circle of membership...[and it will] cause others, including those in academe, to lose interest in the activity" (p.444). This has already happened to NDT debate. Only drastic and immediate changes can correct it.

One solution is to have more judges without debate experi-

ence [Jensen & Preston]. It would force debate to be more audience-centered, which can only benefit the activity. I expect reactions to be quite negative. Debaters, NDT in particular, want only experienced judges and for good reason. Their speaking style would alienate and offend a layperson. By forcing them to adapt to an audience-style debate, students would be more prepared for real world discourse.

III. Integrate NDT Debate

A. Integrate Programs

Students should learn how to debate all types of propositions: fact, value and policy, in order to be well-rounded [Henderson 1990]. However, the history of NDT indicates choosing policy will exclude all others. Ludlum [1991] found that NDT programs in particular were isolated from the rest of forensics. Over 40% of NDT schools do not participate in any other forensic activity [Ludlum at 6]. A variety of reasons lead to this specialization. First, an extensive forensics program greatly burdens the coach/director [Derryberry 1991] which is increased without graduate assistants [Simerly & McGee 1991]. The earlier poll found that over 70% of active forensics programs have no graduate assistants at all [Ludlum at 6].

Budget restrictions also play a major role in restricting the forensics program to one or two activities [Cue 1990 & Wright 1990]. A program, with limited funds, may not be able to afford

the travel expenses of a multi-faceted squad. Whatever the reason, programs are harmed by eliminating either individual events of debate.

A well-rounded forensics program should expose the student to a variety of activities, each with their own particular benefit [Dittus 1991]. Simerly & McGee (1991) and Dittus (1991) agree that debate and individual events should not be thought of as mutually exclusive or competing activities. These activities compliment each other by variations on persuasive styles and content. Segregating the activities gives the impression that one activity is superior and one is inferior [Brown 1990].

NDT schools need to offer more forensic activities, especially individual events. This will not only strengthen interest in NDT and individual events, but also encourage more emphasis on speaking style for NDT, since it is so important in individual events.

B. Integrate Tournaments

Wright (1990) noted that only a third (1/3) of tournaments offer both debate and individual events. This harms programs by wasting resources and requiring coaches to double their travel time to accommodate an integrated program [Dittus 1991]. To save limited resources, coaches burnout and increase the opportunities for forensic participation, tournaments need to be integrated in

two ways. First, tournaments should offer all events, to decrease the time and costs of traveling to separate debate and individual events tournaments. Second, the tournaments should be structured in such a way to allow students to compete in both activities [Dittus at 27]. All students, but especially NDT debaters, would benefit from the exposure to activities which place more emphasis on delivery and audience adaptation.

IV. De-emphasize Research

Decreasing the emphasis on research will make the activity more interesting to the lay person and easier for newcomers to join, both of which are chronic problems for NDT. To aid this change in philosophy, several changes would be needed. The following changes were recommended by the respondents of the earlier poll. The changes all have at their core the need to decrease the emphasis on research.

A. Release the Topic in the Fall

New schools and new freshman are months behind at the start of the semester by releasing the topic in the summer. I propose the topic be released in the fall, with the CEDA topic. This would create a level playing field for the new schools. New schools would not be horribly behind in research and topic development by beginning a NDT program in September, when the students arrive on campus.

Two reasons support this view. First, CEDA releases the topic in the fall. One can hardly argue that CEDA Debaters do not have enough time for research. Second, the debate community wants the change. Changing the topic release date was the third choice of solutions from the poll [Ludlum at 15]. Changing the date could also benefit active NDT schools. Summers could now be spent taking classes, vacations, or leisure time with family and friends. All of which conflict with an active forensics program.

B. Stop Relying On Backfiles

Reliance and expectations of a wealth of past research will dissuade new entrants into NDT Debate. New schools may not be willing or able to invest large amounts of time in research. NDT needs to change the attitudes of those in the activity, not change rules of research. This would be difficult to accomplish. NDT Debate is not just a research game, it is applied research in a communicative forum to discuss and defend certain propositions. The recent history of NDT shows it has emphasized extensive research while ignoring basic speaking skills.

C. Have Two Topics Each Year

Ziegelmueller (1990) explained that having two topics per year has done little to prevent abusive speaking styles or diminish the importance of research. However, the idea is to encourage non-NDT teams to experiment with NDT. By having only one

topic per year, schools would not join the activity late in the year. These schools recognize that they would be at a large disadvantage on research and topic development. By having two topics each year, schools could join during the middle of the year, while forensics programs are active. With this option, schools could switch from CEDA to NDT during the semester break, without being behind on research or the development of the topic. By having two topics per year, schools should begin to experiment with NDT. Henderson (1990) has even advocated using the same problem area for NDT and CEDA as a way to encourage more switching during the academic year.

V. A CALL FOR ACTION

NDT is beyond the point of calling 911. It is almost to the point of calling the local mortuary. NDT Debate has steadily declined for several years. Participation and tournament numbers have plummeted. If NDT Debate does not change, and change drastically, it will be dead in very short order. It is often said that occasionally the doctor has to cut to cure. It is certainly true for NDT debate.

Every director of forensics will need to support drastic changes to enhance the four goals: re-emphasize communication skills, encourage new participants, integrate NDT debate and de-emphasize research. So far, changes have done little to increase the participation in NDT debate [Morello 1991]. In fact, high school policy debate has declined by as much as two-thirds in

some parts of the country [Fawcett 1991] due in part to a perception that college policy debate is dying.

It may already be too late for NDT debate. For even a remote chance of survival, changes must be drastic and immediate. Further time-consuming theoretical discussions only further propel the activity to a certain death. We have acknowledged that something is wrong, and that it is worth saving. What is needed now is action by the forensics community.

ENDNOTES

[1] See References to Ashmore (1981), Dempsey & Hartman (1986), Howe (1979), Kovalcheck (1979), Henderson (1990), Trapp (1990), Ziegelmueller (1990), and Morello & Soenksen (1989).

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